

White Oleander

White Oleander (*Nerium oleander*) is a highly fragrant, fast-growing evergreen shrub featuring clusters of white, 5-petaled flowers blooming from late spring through fall. Thriving in hot, sunny, drought-tolerant conditions, it reaches 8–25 feet tall and is commonly used for screens, hedges, or coastal landscaping. Crucially, all parts of the plant are extremely poisonous to humans and animals if ingested.

"I can try to pretend, I can try to forget."

Est

The hours passed in a rhythm I was learning to love.

Models cycled through the studio like seasons changing in fast-forward. Each one brought something new—a different energy, a different story told through makeup and styling and the particular way they held themselves under the lights. The art director's vision was unfolding exactly as planned: modern, vibrant, a celebration of beauty in all its variations.

I moved through my positions, camera raised, focus sharp. The other photographer—Mint, reliable and skilled—worked her angles while I worked mine. We'd developed a wordless choreography over the past sessions, an understanding of when to step forward and when to pull back, when to capture the same moment from different perspectives and when to let the other take the lead.

The makeup was artistic. Bold. Colors that wouldn't exist in nature but somehow looked completely natural on skin, like these faces had been born with sunset-pink eyelids and ocean-blue liner. The stylists had outdone themselves, creating looks that walked the line between wearable and editorial—the kind of images that would make people stop scrolling and actually look.

And the models themselves...They weren't the typical beauty I'd grown numb to over years of commercial work. Not the same face repeated with minor variations, not the homogenized prettiness that made every influencer look like a slightly different filter applied to the same template. These were people with presence. Different ages—some barely twenty, others closer to forty. Different body types. Different hair colors, some natural and some obviously, gloriously artificial. Real tattoos mixed with the temporary ones we were showcasing, the new line's water-activated designs promising to last for days.

There were rhinestone applications too—delicate crystals that caught the light like scattered stars, promising to stay put for twenty-four hours of festival chaos. I photographed them on cheekbones and collarbones and the backs of hands, each placement deliberate, each sparkle intentional. This was what modern beauty looked like. Not a single standard, but a spectrum. Not perfection, but intention.

I was grateful to be documenting it.

Behind me, I heard voices from the door that connected to the makeup room.

Soft encouragements, the kind that floated through studios during every shoot. "You look amazing." "Don't be nervous." "Just breathe and be yourself." The standard reassurances offered to models who were about to step in front of cameras and judgment.

I didn't turn around. Another model coming through was routine at this point—we'd had probably a dozen already, each one bringing their own energy to the set before cycling back to change for their next look or heading home for the day. But something in the quality of the voices made me pause. A tenderness that went beyond professional encouragement. Like whoever was coming through the door was someone they actually cared about, not just another face in the lineup.

And then he walked in.

Lego.

My camera nearly slipped from my fingers. I caught myself—physically, professionally—and raised the viewfinder back to my eye like nothing had happened. Like my heart hadn't just stuttered in my chest. Like seeing him here, in this context, wasn't completely unexpected and yet somehow made perfect sense.

Of course he was a model. Of course he'd been booked for this campaign. I'd known, in some abstract way, that he did this kind of work—the part-time jobs that kept him busy, the photo shoots that had given him those extensions he'd grown fond of. But knowing and seeing were different things. Seeing was...Focus, I told myself. You're a professional. Act like one.

I photographed him like I'd photographed every other model. Found my angles. Captured the light as it fell across his features. Documented the makeup and styling with the same clinical attention I'd brought to everyone else.

But I couldn't stop looking.

His makeup was beautiful in a different way than the others.

Where some of the models had been painted with drama—bold colors, sharp lines, the kind of looks that demanded attention from across a room—Lego's face had been treated with restraint. Enhancement rather than transformation. The eyeshadows were there, the liner, the mascara, but they worked with his features instead of over them.

Natural, somehow. Even with the rhinestones.

The crystals curved around his eyes like scattered stars, white and sparkling,

catching the studio lights with every tiny movement. They should have looked theatrical, costume-like. Instead, they looked like they'd grown there. Like his face had simply decided to bloom with light.

Pearl and seashell jewelry adorned his ears and neck—delicate, oceanic, perfectly aligned with the Songkran water-festival theme. The pieces caught the light differently than the rhinestones, softer and more organic, turning him into something that belonged half in water and half in air.

His shirt was white, almost transparent, the kind of fabric that suggested rather than revealed. One shoulder was bare, and there—on the exposed skin—a temporary tattoo of wings. The design was intricate, feathered, looking almost real in the way it curved over his shoulder blade. Like he might actually be able to fly if he tried.

And his hair.

The extensions were definitely gone now. What remained was his natural length, dark and soft, pulled back in a small ponytail that left his face open to the cameras. His bangs fell in waves across his forehead, framing features that I'd only ever seen in the chaos of flower shops and emotional conversations.

Here, under proper lighting, with a team of professionals having prepared him for exactly this moment...

He was radiant.

The makeup artists seemed proud.

I caught glimpses of them hovering at the edge of the set, watching their work under the lights. One of them darted forward between shots to apply more powder to Lego's nose—the kind of minor touch-up that happened constantly during shoots, preventing shine, maintaining the illusion.

Lego held still for it, patient and practiced. His eyes stayed forward, that particular blank focus of someone who'd learned to be a canvas. But I saw his gaze flicker—just for a second—across the studio. Taking in the crew, the equipment, the other photographers.

Did he see me? If he did, he didn't react. His expression remained neutral, professional, the face of a model doing his job.

I wondered if he knew I'd be here. Wondered if seeing me was as unexpected for him as seeing him was for me. Wondered what he was thinking, behind that careful blankness.

I forced myself to focus. Click. The rhinestones caught light beautifully against his skin. Click. The wing tattoo curved like it was actually part of him. Click. His profile,

turned slightly toward the key light, cheekbones highlighted, the jewelry at his ear creating points of soft reflection.

Professional photographs. Technical excellence. The same quality I'd brought to every model who'd come through the studio today. But I was lying to myself if I pretended it felt the same. Because underneath the professionalism, underneath the camera between us and the crew around us and all the distance that a studio shoot imposed—

I was watching him. Not in the way I'd watched William. Not with obsession or desperation or the particular madness of wanting someone who couldn't want me back. This was different. Quieter. More careful.

I was watching him the way I'd learned to watch myself in therapy. With attention. With curiosity. With the recognition that what was visible on the surface might not match what was happening underneath.

He looked radiant. He looked beautiful. He looked exactly like someone should look when they're being professionally photographed for a major campaign. But I'd seen him in the flower shop, just days ago. I'd seen the tiredness in his shoulders. The shadows under his eyes. The way he'd flinched when I mentioned William hurting him.

Was that tiredness still there? Was it hiding under the powder and the lighting and the careful angles?

I couldn't tell. That was the point of professional photography—to create an image that said exactly what you wanted it to say, nothing more. The Lego in my viewfinder was confident, beautiful, perfectly at ease.

The Lego I'd talked to in the flower shop had been carrying weight that wasn't his to carry.

I didn't know which one was more real.

Maybe both. Maybe neither. Maybe the truth, as always, was somewhere in between.

The session continued.

Six hours total, with a forty-minute break somewhere in the middle. Lego cycled through the set like all the other models—entering, posing, being photographed, exiting to change or touch up or simply rest before returning. The structure of the day left no room for personal conversations, no space for the kind of honest exchange we'd had at the flower shop.

I did my job. I took my photographs. I documented the makeup and the styling and the way Lego's face caught light like it had been designed for exactly this purpose.

And I tried not to stare.

Tried not to wonder about the details I couldn't photograph—the state of his sleep, the weight of his schedule, the complicated tangle of feelings around Tui that he'd never quite hidden from me. Tried not to project my own experience of exhaustion and breakdown onto someone who was, by all visible evidence, perfectly fine.

You don't know him, I reminded myself. You've talked to him twice. You don't get to assume you understand his inner life. But I'd said the same thing about myself, once. Insisted I was fine when I wasn't. Performed competence and calm while falling apart inside. Sometimes the people who looked most radiant were the ones running on empty. Sometimes the brightest lights were burning themselves out.

The wrap came eventually.

"That's a wrap for today!" The art director's voice carried across the studio, triggering the familiar release of tension that always followed a long shoot. Bodies relaxed. Voices rose. The particular energy of focused work dissolved into the looser atmosphere of a job completed.

Around me, models were clustering in small groups. Some exchanging social media handles—the modern equivalent of business cards, building networks that might lead to future bookings. Others taking selfies, documenting their own appearance before the makeup was removed and the magic faded. Still others simply gathering their things, ready to leave and return to their regular lives.

I packed up my equipment first. Cameras into cases. Lenses capped and secured. Memory cards labeled and stored with the careful attention of someone who knew how much work those tiny pieces of plastic represented.

Then I went looking for Lego. I didn't have a plan, exactly. Didn't know what I'd say if I found him. Maybe just hello. Maybe just good to see you. Maybe something more—a check-in, a question, the kind of connection you offer when you've shared something real and don't want to lose the thread.

But he wasn't at the main gathering of models.

I scanned the studio. The makeup stations—empty, or occupied by other faces. The styling area—racks of clothes abandoned, no one browsing. The break room door—open, but the space beyond was quiet.

He wasn't anywhere. Had he already left? Changed quickly and slipped out while I was packing my equipment? It was possible—the session had been long, and not everyone wanted to linger afterward. Some people just wanted to go home, wash off the makeup, return to themselves.

Or maybe he was avoiding me.

Maybe seeing me at the shoot had been uncomfortable. Maybe the flower shop conversation had been more difficult than he'd let on. Maybe he didn't want to navigate the complexity of our connection in a professional environment.

I wouldn't blame him if that was true. We weren't friends, exactly. We were... something else. Something undefined. Two people who'd crossed paths through a third person's disaster, who'd shared a few honest moments, who existed in each other's orbits without quite knowing why.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe more would be too much.

I said my goodbyes.

Made my way around the studio, thanking people properly. The art director, for her vision and her patience. The makeup artists, for their incredible work. My fellow photographers, for a day of smooth collaboration. Nut, for everything—the opportunity, the leadership, the kind of management that made hard work feel worthwhile.

"You're leaving already?" Nut asked, surprised. "Some of us are grabbing drinks to celebrate."

"I'm beat." I said.

Everyone received their thanks. Everyone got the professional courtesy they deserved.

And then I left.

The lobby was quieter now, the day's energy dissipated. A few crew members waiting for elevators. A security guard at his station. The particular emptiness of a building at the end of a long workday.

I pushed through the glass doors and stepped out into the evening.

Bangkok was doing its usual transition—golden light giving way to neon, street food smells beginning to compete with exhaust, the particular rhythm of a city settling into night. I stood on the sidewalk for a moment, camera bag on my shoulder, breathing in the familiar chaos.

Lego was somewhere in this city. Probably heading home. Probably washing off the rhinestones and the powder and returning to whoever he was when no one was photographing him.

I hoped he was okay.

That was the thing I kept coming back to. Not curiosity, exactly. Not professional interest. Just... hope. The kind you held for someone you'd glimpsed behind their

mask, even briefly. The kind that came from recognizing the weight in someone else's shoulders because you'd carried the same weight yourself.

He'd given me a resurrection plant and told me that dead things could come back to life. I hoped he was giving himself the same kindness.

I checked my phone as I walked toward the bus stop.

A message from Tui: How was the shoot?

I thought about how to answer. About Lego's appearance, unexpected and beautiful. About the professionalism that had kept us from actually talking. About the way he'd vanished before I could find him.

Good, I typed back. Long but good. I'll tell you about it later.

Then I added: Have you talked to Lego recently?

The reply came after a pause that felt significant.

Tui: Why?

I stared at the single word. Something in its brevity felt defensive. Worried. The response of someone who knew there was a reason for the question and wasn't sure they wanted to hear it.

He was at the shoot today, I wrote. As a model. He looked good.

Another pause.

He models sometimes. Tui replied.

I know. I just... wanted to make sure he's okay.

The typing indicator appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Finally:

Tui: I don't know if he is.

I read the message twice. The honesty of it. The admission embedded in those five words—that Tui was worried too, that the situation with Lego wasn't resolved, that whatever had happened between them was still unfolding in ways neither of them fully controlled.

Talk to him, I sent. For real, Tui. Not just about the work stuff. Really talk to him.

No reply came.

I pocketed my phone, watching the city scroll past as I made my way home. The

resurrection plant would be waiting on my desk, a little greener than yesterday, a little more unfurled. Evidence of slow healing, patient growth.

I hoped Lego had something similar. Someone adding water. Something helping him remember how to be alive. But I wasn't sure. And that uncertainty stayed with me, quiet but present, all the way home.

The bus stop wasn't far.—the familiar shelter, the route numbers I'd memorized, the small cluster of people already waiting. My body wanted to autopilot there, to fall into the comfortable routine of public transit and the quiet ride home. But something stopped me.

A thought. A promise. The kind of resolution that had been building slowly over weeks of therapy and self-reflection, finally finding its voice in this ordinary moment.

Treat yourself better. Take better care of yourself.

It wasn't a dramatic revelation. Just a quiet reminder that the old patterns—rushing through life, neglecting basic needs, treating my own wellbeing as an afterthought—those patterns hadn't served me. And I was trying to be someone different now. Someone who made time for themselves. Someone who didn't just survive, but actually lived.

I pulled out my phone and opened the map app. This wasn't an area I knew well. My mental geography of Bangkok was shaped by necessity—the routes between my apartment and work, the path to Ink & Ashes, the streets near the university where I'd spent my student years. This neighborhood was outside those familiar circuits, just a place I passed through on my way to somewhere else. A supermarket appeared on the map, about ten minutes' walk from where I stood. I smiled. Such a small thing—buying groceries for myself, stocking my refrigerator with actual food instead of whatever could be delivered. But it felt like progress. Like proof that I was building a life, not just waiting for one to happen to me.

I shouldered my backpack and started walking.

The supermarket was nicer than I expected. The ones Tui and I usually visited were utilitarian—fluorescent lights, crowded aisles, the kind of no-frills functionality that prioritized price over atmosphere. This place was different. The facade was modern, almost elegant. The parking lot was expansive, filled with cars that suggested a wealthier clientele than I was used to.

Inside the building, before even reaching the actual grocery section, I found a small complex of shops. A coffee place with comfortable seating. An ice cream parlor with a chalkboard menu listing flavors I'd never heard of.

And—surprisingly—a flower shop. I paused at the entrance, taking it in. The colors

were familiar—the same palette as the facade of the building where Lego worked. But this was much smaller, almost boutique. Floral arrangements rather than loose stems. Small potted flowers rather than buckets of roses. The accessory wall held stuffed animals, gift bags, greeting cards—the kind of curated selection you'd find at an upscale hospital gift shop.

Not the kind of place Lego would work. But the same world, somehow. The same language of flowers and care and things given to express what words couldn't. I didn't go in. I wasn't sure why I'd stopped at all. Maybe just to acknowledge the connection. To recognize that flowers were everywhere now, woven through my life in ways they hadn't been before. Before William. Before Lego. Before the resurrection plant on my desk. I moved on into the supermarket proper.

The store was cavernous and nearly empty. I grabbed a shopping basket and wandered, the quiet amplifying every small sound—the hum of refrigeration units, the soft music playing over invisible speakers, my own footsteps echoing slightly on the polished floor. The aisles stretched out in front of me, organized by signs I didn't quite know how to navigate. This wasn't my usual territory. I didn't have a mental map of where things lived, couldn't autopilot to the sections I needed.

So I wandered.

Vegetables first—I found the produce section and selected things that looked fresh, things I might actually cook instead of letting them wilt in my refrigerator as evidence of good intentions gone wrong. Rice noodles from the pasta aisle, easy to prepare, versatile. Meat that was on sale, the reduced price sticker promising value if I used it within a couple of days. Milk. Oil and vinegar. The basics that turned a kitchen from empty storage into a functional space. And then, because I was treating myself—because that was the whole point of this detour—I added ice cream. And soda. Things that served no nutritional purpose but existed purely for pleasure.

Small kindnesses, I thought. This is what they look like.

My basket was satisfyingly full as I made my way toward the checkout.

I saw her before she saw me.

My mother.

The recognition hit like a physical blow—a sharp intake of breath, a tightening in my chest, the world suddenly narrowing to a single point of focus. Her hair was arranged in an elaborate bun, dark strands threaded through with gray. More gray than I remembered, though I supposed that was natural. Time passed for everyone, even for people you tried to forget. She was dressed elegantly—a long skirt, jewelry that caught the light, the polished presentation of someone attending something important.

And beside her, in a suit that looked more expensive than anything I'd ever seen him wear...

My father.

His hair was completely white now, cut short and neat. No beard—he'd always been clean-shaven, particular about his appearance in that way that suggested he believed looking good was the same as being good. He moved through the aisle with the confidence of someone who belonged in expensive places, who expected the world to arrange itself around his preferences.

They were in the city for work, probably. Some business function that required suits and elegant hairdos.—this wasn't their neighborhood, wasn't anywhere close to the house I'd been kicked out of years ago.

Just coincidence. Just chance. Just the universe's cruel sense of humor, placing them in my path on a day when I'd finally started feeling like myself again.

He's probably in the city for work, some rational part of my brain supplied. They're probably just passing through. But rational thought was already drowning under the flood of memory.

The spiral started before I could stop it. My father's hand. Cold. Harsh. The way it had felt when it connected with my face, with my shoulder, with whatever part of me was closest when his anger needed a target. My mother's silence. Her careful distance. The way she'd stood in doorways and watched without intervening, her presence a kind of permission.

The day they'd found out. The coldness in their eyes. The door closing behind me as I left with a backpack full of whatever I could grab, leaving behind everything else—my childhood, my safety, the illusion that I was loved unconditionally. The years of silence after. No calls. No texts. No evidence that they remembered they had a son. All of it crashed over me in waves, and I was drowning before I even realized I was in the water.

The day he found out. His face going cold. The door slamming shut in his expression before it slammed shut on my life. The declaration that I was no longer his son, delivered with the same flat precision he'd use to cancel a magazine subscription.

Get out.

Two words. That's all it had taken to end my childhood.

My mother's eyes met mine. Across the aisle, across the years, across everything that had happened between us and failed to happen. She recognized me. Of course she did. I was still her son, no matter how many years had passed. The same face she'd helped create, the same eyes that had once looked at her with love and trust

and the simple faith that mothers protected their children.

I saw her take a small step back. A flinch. A retreat. The same response she'd always had when confronted with something uncomfortable—not to address it, not to face it, but to simply... withdraw. Not toward me. Not to close the distance, not to reach out, not to acknowledge in any way that we were connected. Just—back. Away. A retreat from something unpleasant that had wandered into her carefully curated life.

She looked away. No wave. No acknowledgment. No sign that seeing her son for the first time in years meant anything at all. Just a turned head, a redirected gaze, the polite fiction that I didn't exist. That I had never existed.

My hands were trembling as I approached the checkout.

I set my basket on the counter with movements that felt mechanical, automatic. My body was going through the motions while my mind was somewhere else entirely—stuck in that moment of eye contact, replaying the small step back, the averted gaze, the deliberate choice to pretend.

She saw me and chose nothing.

The cashier said something. I didn't hear it. Just fumbled for my card, inserted it, waited for the beep that meant the transaction was complete.

The reusable bag that Tui had given me—one of his studio's promotional items, simple and practical—swallowed my groceries. I packed without thinking, wanting only to be gone, to be anywhere but here, to put distance between myself and the aisle where my parents were still shopping like nothing had happened.

Because for them, nothing had.

I was already erased from their lives. Had been erased for years. Seeing me was just an inconvenience, a reminder of something they'd rather forget. The ice cream in my bag suddenly felt less like a treat and more like comfort food for the depressing night ahead.

I pushed through the exit doors and stopped.

Rain.

Not the gentle mist of Bangkok's typical afternoon showers, but a true downpour. The kind that turned streets into rivers and made the air taste like water. It hammered against the pavement, created curtains of gray between me and the rest of the world, transformed the parking lot into a thousand tiny explosions.

I cursed under my breath.

No umbrella. Of course no umbrella. Who carried an umbrella on a day that had started clear and sunny? The walk to the bus stop was ten minutes—ten minutes of being absolutely soaked, arriving at the shelter dripping and miserable. But even as I calculated the logistics, part of my mind was still inside the supermarket. Still seeing my mother's face. Still feeling the weight of her rejection, fresh and old at the same time.

My parents could come out at any moment. They might walk past me. Might pretend again that I wasn't there. Might give me that same turned head, that same averted gaze, that same careful nothing. Or worse—they might acknowledge me. Might speak. Might open wounds that I'd only just started to heal.

Getting wet didn't sound so bad, suddenly. Getting soaked was just water. Just discomfort. Just the kind of problem that resolved itself with time and dry clothes. The things inside me—the spiral, the memories, the fresh ache of being unseen—those wouldn't wash away so easily. I took a breath. Prepared to step into the rain.

And then someone was beside me.

An umbrella opened with a soft whuff of fabric expanding, and suddenly there was shelter. Color above me—a light violet canopy covered with printed figures. A rabbit, maybe. Or a cat. Or a puppy. Something cute and childish and completely at odds with the adult world of supermarkets and estranged parents and grief.

The umbrella was pink.

"It's raining cats and dogs." a voice said.

I knew that voice. I'd heard it just hours ago, at the studio. And days before that, at the flower shop. And in complicated fragments, through conversations with Tui and Hong and the general tangle of people whose lives had intersected with mine. I looked beyond the umbrella. Beyond my own feet, still planted on the threshold between dry and drenched.

Lego stood there.

He'd changed out of his modeling clothes—the transparent white shirt, the wing tattoo, the rhinestones. Now he was dressed simply, casually, in something that looked comfortable and soft. His hair was still in that small ponytail, his natural length, though the studio styling had been traded for something looser. And across his body, a crossbody bag that was pure Lego—lace and hearts, the kind of accessory that shouldn't work but somehow did.

Inside the bag, visible through the decorative opening, beautiful white flowers.

White Oleander.

I stared at the flowers. My photographer's eye cataloged them automatically: five

petals, clustered arrangement, the particular waxy quality of the leaves. I'd seen them before, probably. Had photographed them somewhere, sometime. But I couldn't place the name, couldn't remember what they meant in the language of flowers that Lego spoke so fluently.

They were beautiful. That much was obvious.

And they were sitting in his bag like they belonged there, like carrying flowers everywhere was just what Lego did, like his life was constantly in bloom.

"P'Est?"

His voice pulled me back. He was looking at me with something like concern—brow slightly furrowed, head tilted in that way people did when they were trying to read a situation.

"You okay?"

The question was so simple. So genuine. So exactly what I needed and absolutely didn't know how to answer. I thought about lying. About saying fine, just waiting out the rain, what a coincidence seeing you here. About performing normalcy the way I'd been performing it for years. But my hands were still trembling. And my mother was still inside, The stress response that was flooding me with cortisol and memory and pain.

"No," I heard myself say. "I don't think I am."

Lego didn't press. He just nodded, like that answer made perfect sense, like no was a completely acceptable thing to be. Like he understood, somehow, that sometimes people weren't okay and the only honest response was to admit it.

"Walk with me?"

He tilted the umbrella—his ridiculous, beautiful, too-small-for-two-people umbrella—in a way that suggested we could share. That we could move together through the rain, shoulder to shoulder, protected by violet fabric and cartoon animals. I thought about the bus stop. About my empty apartment. About the evening I'd been planning, ice cream and solitude and the slow work of processing what had just happened.

"Okay." I said.

We stepped into the rain together.

Then I heard voices behind us.

Approaching. Getting closer. The particular cadence of conversation between two people who knew each other well, who had decades of shared language and

shorthand. I couldn't make out the words over the rain, but I didn't need to.

I knew those voices.

I don't know what expression crossed my face in that moment. Something must have shown—something raw and panicked and completely unguarded—because Lego's hand closed around my arm without hesitation.—fear, maybe, or the particular desperation of someone who couldn't handle one more confrontation. Before I could think, before I could decide whether to run or freeze or pretend, his hand was on my arm.

"Come on." he said, and he was already moving, pulling me forward, the umbrella tilted to shield us from both the rain and whatever was behind us.

We walked fast. Almost running, but not quite. The kind of pace that said urgent without screaming fleeing. My legs moved automatically, following his lead, my brain too overwhelmed to do anything except obey.

I didn't look back.

I couldn't. Couldn't risk seeing them. Couldn't risk meeting my mother's eyes again and finding that same deliberate blankness, that calculated dismissal. Couldn't risk seeing my father's face, older now but still carrying all the coldness I remembered. Couldn't risk meeting my mother's eyes again, seeing that careful nothing, that deliberate erasure. Couldn't face my father's white hair and expensive suit, the physical evidence that their lives had continued perfectly well without me in them.

My hands still trembled. My eyes stung. And somewhere in the chaos of rain and running, the spiral that had started in the supermarket aisle continued its descent.

Lego's grip on my arm was firm. Anchoring.

We kept walking.

I don't remember getting into the taxi. One moment we were on the sidewalk, rain hammering the umbrella, Lego's hand on my arm. The next, we were in the back seat of a car, the door closing behind us, the sound of the downpour suddenly muffled to a dull roar against the windows. The umbrella was folded now, dripping onto the floor mat. Lego was saying something to the driver—an address, probably—but the words didn't register.

My hands were still trembling. I looked down at them, watching the fine vibration like it was happening to someone else. These were my hands. The same ones that had held a camera all day, capturing beauty with precision and control. Now they couldn't even hold still.

Everything was fine. That's what I kept thinking, irrational and desperate, as Lego pulled me through the storm. The session had been incredible—professional,

smooth, exactly what I'd hoped for. I was in therapy now, doing the work, learning the patterns, adding water to my own resurrection.

So why?

Why was it so difficult to move forward? Why could one glimpse of my parents undo weeks of progress? Why was I shaking like a child while a nineteen-year-old I barely knew dragged me through a parking lot in the rain?

Because healing isn't linear, Dr. Siriporn had said. Because old wounds can reopen. Because seeing them doesn't erase what they did. But knowing that intellectually and feeling it in my body were different things.

My body felt like it was falling apart.

Everything was fine, I told myself. The session had been incredible. I'm in therapy. I'm healing. I'm adding water, unfurling, becoming alive again.

Why did seeing them undo all of it? Why did one wordless encounter with people who hadn't been part of my life in years have the power to reduce me to this—trembling and spiraling and falling apart in the back of a stranger's taxi?

Something touched my hand.

I looked up, confused, and found Lego pressing a tissue into my palm. His expression was gentle. Concerned, but not pitying. The kind of look you gave someone who was hurting, without making them feel small for it.

"You're crying," he said quietly.

I was?

I touched my face and felt the wetness there. Tears I hadn't noticed falling, mixing with the rain that had caught me before we found shelter. My cheeks were wet, my vision slightly blurred, my body doing things my mind hadn't authorized. I was crying, and I hadn't even known.

"Be my lab rat, P'Est," Lego said, his voice light despite the heaviness of the moment. "For testing new tea leaves."

The non sequitur was so unexpected that I almost laughed. Almost. Something in my chest shifted, the tight knot loosening just a fraction. He handed me more tissues. I took them, pressing them to my face, trying to compose myself into something that resembled a functional human being.

God, I understood why Tui liked him.

There was something about the way Lego moved through the world—this particular kindness that didn't demand anything in return, that didn't require you to explain or

justify or perform gratitude. He'd seen me falling apart and his response wasn't to ask why or offer advice or make me feel worse about my own breakdown.

His response was tea.

His response was come with me, let me take care of you.

The taxi moved through the rain, and I let myself be carried.

I didn't track the route, didn't notice the streets or the landmarks. Just sat in the back seat with my grocery bag on my lap and Lego beside me, his crossbody bag with its poisonous flowers still slung across his chest. The driver had the radio on low—some love song in Thai, the kind that played in every taxi across the country.

Lego didn't ask questions. He didn't demand to know what had happened, who those people were, why I'd fallen apart. He just sat there, a quiet presence, occasionally glancing over to make sure I was still breathing.

I focused on that. On breathing. In and out. The simple biological function that kept me tethered to the present moment. The rain continued to fall.

When we stopped, I didn't recognize the neighborhood.

The building where we stopped was elegant. Not the ridiculous elegance of William's apartment—that glass tower that had felt more like a hotel than a home, all clean lines and expensive emptiness. This was different. The facade was well-maintained but warm, the kind of architecture that suggested families and long-term residents. Window boxes with plants. A lobby that looked lived-in rather than designed.

Lego paid the driver before I could think to offer. Then he was opening the door, umbrella snapping open again, reaching back to take my arm.

"Come on." he said again. The same words as before, the same gentle insistence.

I followed. The rain was still heavy, loud against the umbrella, turning the world into a watercolor blur. We walked quickly toward a building entrance, Lego navigating with the confidence of someone who'd made this journey a thousand times.

We took the elevator in silence. Fourth floor. The numbers climbing slowly, the hum of machinery filling the quiet. I watched the display, not looking at Lego, not trusting myself to speak. When the doors opened, he led me down a hallway and stopped at a door decorated with a small wreath of dried flowers. The key was already in his hand.

"Make yourself comfortable, P'Est." he said, pushing it open.

The apartment was full of stuffed animals. That was my first impression—the overwhelming presence of soft things. Plushies on every surface, in every size, in

every color. Bears and cats and rabbits and creatures I couldn't identify, arranged with obvious care across furniture and shelves.

I stood in the entryway, taking off my shoes because that seemed like the thing to do, leaving them by the door next to Lego's own collection of footwear.

"Sit," he said, gesturing toward the living room. "I'll make tea."

I walked to the sofa on autopilot. It was occupied by cat plushies—a whole colony of them, orange and gray and calico, their button eyes watching me with friendly indifference. I sat down carefully, not wanting to disturb them, and found myself next to a curious pink snail plushie that seemed to be smiling. The coffee table was being used as a gathering place for teddy bears. They sat in a cluster, arranged like they were having a meeting, their fuzzy faces turned toward each other in eternal conversation.

In front of me, the kitchen table had been claimed by teddy bears. They sat in positions that suggested they were having a meeting, or maybe just a very quiet tea party. Someone—Lego, obviously—had arranged them with intention.

Beyond the plushies, I could see the kitchen area—open plan, connected to the living space. Lego was moving through it with quick, practiced efficiency, pulling down cups and containers, filling a kettle, organizing things I couldn't quite see.

I turned to the window. It was still raining. The glass was streaked with water, the city beyond blurred into impressionist smears of light and shadow. But through the blur, I could see the terrace. A long wooden bench, and on it—Flowers. Pots and planters and trailing vines, all arranged with obvious intention. Even in the rain, even through the water-streaked glass, they were beautiful. Bright spots of color against the gray evening, life persisting despite the weather.

"Do you like them?"

Lego's voice surprised me. I hadn't heard him approach. He was standing nearby now, carrying a tray laden with small cups and cookies, his expression curious and warm.

"They're beautiful." I said, looking at the flowers one more time through the window.

I didn't know why I was here. Didn't know why Lego—whom I barely knew, whom I'd only really talked to twice, whose life I'd stumbled into through the wreckage of my obsession with someone else—had brought me to his home. Didn't know why he hadn't just walked past me at the supermarket, or put me in a taxi alone, or done any of the reasonable things that strangers did when confronted with someone else's breakdown.

Why didn't you abandon me? The question sat on my tongue, unasked.

Why didn't you just ignore me? I remained silent.

Why he hadn't done what my mother had done.

Lego set the tray on the coffee table, carefully negotiating around the teddy bear meeting.

"My favorite is the rose petal infusion." he said, pointing to one of the small cups. The liquid inside was pink—actually pink, like something from a fairy tale.

I looked at it, confused and charmed in equal measure.

"Relaxing, digestive, antioxidant and anti-inflammatory, rich in vitamins A and B." Lego recited, almost as if he were reading from a product description. His voice was light, easy, like this was the most natural thing in the world—serving tea to a crying stranger you'd rescued from a parking lot.

I wanted to ask a thousand things.

Why did you bring me here? Why didn't you just leave me? Why are you being kind to someone you barely know? Why do you understand what I need before I know I need it?

But the questions stayed locked behind my teeth, too heavy to voice.

"This one's black tea with roses," Lego continued, pointing to another cup. His finger moved along the row. "This one's the new green tea. Jasmine. Calendula. Orange blossom. And cornflower."

A whole garden in tiny cups, steaming gently, filling the air with fragrance.

"Thank you." I said. It was inadequate. Completely, utterly inadequate for what he was doing, for the shelter he was providing, for the way he'd appeared exactly when I needed someone and hadn't asked for anything in return. But it was all I had.

Lego just smiled at me. It was bright—that was the word that came to mind. Bright like sunlight, like the flowers on his terrace, like something that had no business existing in a world that also contained my parents' cold dismissal and the rain still hammering against the windows. Almost like a painting, I thought. Almost like something William might have tried to capture.

"Be careful," Lego said, settling onto the floor across from me, folding his legs beneath him like a child at a tea party. "It's hot."

I reached for the rose petal infusion. The cup was warm in my hands—not burning, just comforting. The heat seeped into my fingers, slowly steadying the tremor that had been there since the supermarket. I brought it close to my face and breathed in. Roses. Of course. But also something else—honey, maybe, or the particular

sweetness of petals themselves.

I took a small sip.

It was delicate. Gentle. The kind of flavor that didn't demand attention but quietly made itself known. Nothing like the bitter coffee I usually drank to stay alert through long shoots, nothing like the cheap beer Tui and I shared on the studio steps.

This was something else entirely.

Something soft.

"Good?" Lego asked, watching me over his own cup—the jasmine, I thought, though I wasn't sure.

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

The rain continued outside. The stuffed animals continued their silent vigil. And I sat there in Lego's pastel apartment, surrounded by soft things and flower tea, feeling the ice that had formed in my chest when I saw my parents slowly, slowly begin to thaw.

I didn't know how long we sat there.

Long enough for the tea to cool. Long enough for the rain to ease from downpour to steady patter. Long enough for the trembling in my hands to stop completely, replaced by something that might have been calm.

Lego didn't push for conversation.

He offered cookies—delicate things with flower petals baked into them, probably from the same mysterious supplier as the tea. He refilled my cup when it emptied, this time with the orange blossom variety. He talked, occasionally, about small things—the tea's origins, the flowers on his terrace, the stuffed animals and where they'd come from.

Nothing heavy. Nothing that required me to be anything other than present.

It was the kindest thing anyone had done for me in a long time.

Maybe ever.

"The snail's name is Momo." Lego said eventually, nodding toward the pink plushie beside me.

I looked at it—really looked, for the first time. It was smiling, its embroidered mouth curved upward, its antenna drooping slightly like it was tired but content.

"Momo." I repeated.

"My sister gave it to me." Lego's voice was soft. Careful, in a way that suggested the story had weight. "A long time ago."

I waited, sensing there was more. But he didn't continue, just took another sip of his tea, his eyes distant for a moment before returning to the present.

"I like surrounding myself with soft things," he said instead. "It helps."

Helps with what, I wanted to ask. But I didn't. Because I was starting to understand that Lego carried his own weight, his own shadows, his own reasons for building a fortress of plushies and flowers against a world that wasn't always kind.

Just because someone smiles a lot doesn't mean they're happy inside. The thought surfaced from somewhere—a conversation, maybe, or something I'd read. It felt true. It felt like a description of the boy sitting across from me, surrounded by soft things, offering tea to a stranger who'd been crying in a parking lot.

"Thank you." I said again.

It still wasn't enough. But Lego just smiled, bright and warm, like it was.